

HEIMITO VON DODERER

The Torture Of The Little Leather Pouches

Translated by Vincent Kling

Some few days after the burial service for that old miser Mr. Coyle, Mr. Crotter appeared on my doorstep; he had been the closest friend of the gentleman recently deceased and was the only man in our town, or indeed in the entire district, of whom it could be said that he was even richer; he was considered to be the wealthier man by many times over, in fact. The clock was just moving toward nine when Mr. Crotter came in; I was sitting by the fire, having finished my breakfast, and was still holding my teacup in my hand. Outside, a smoke-filled winter fog lay against the windows. "So early?" I said, while rising and greeting the old gentleman, "is there anything new? I was thinking of calling on you at around midday today" (at that time I was still Crotter's lawyer), "but here you are already, honoring me with a morning visit to my modest home," I added, offering him an easy chair and a cigar. "Look here," he began after a few puffs, "I was passing by your house when the thought came to me that you're actually quite a sensible young man, and so I decided on the spot to climb your stairs and have a talk with you in a matter concerning our deceased friend Coyle."

"Oh," I said, "something about the will?" For all sorts of reasons that would appear quite understandable, the will had by now become a frequent topic of conversation in our town. At first, after that old Harpagon had yet again, but this time once and for all, been felled by one of his attacks, there was absolutely no record of any kind to be found regarding a last will and testament; now, however, everyone's curiosity seemed awakened once more, this time about a certain document come to light at last—as noised abroad for the past two days—and what stipulations it might have made in consideration of so substantial a fortune; whether the parish, at least, or some charitable institution endowed out of public funds might not have been granted a legacy, and more of the same. "Are you at all mentioned in the will?" I asked, "or do you figure in the estate in any way?"

"I would have no way of knowing that yet," said Mr. Crotter; "they're only now preparing to open the document. I just happened to meet the notary on the street half an hour ago, and I told him I would be here with you. And incidentally, I understand that relatives have been found, a natural daughter or something of that kind. You surely must realize, moreover, that I truly have no cause to be keeping a sharp eye out for an inheritance, and if old Coyle has in fact bequeathed me anything of value, I will directly turn it over to the pastor, because I harbor no desire for the heaped-up treasures of that repugnant old miser."

"Pardon me," I said in mild astonishment, "you were nevertheless his only friend, indeed the only person with whom he had any contact at all. That's almost literally the case. After all, they say he didn't keep even a single servant."

"Not one soul. Some old slattern came by day, cooked, and saw to whatever was needed. He made it a point to stand over her in the kitchen

and watch that she didn't put too much oil or butter in the pan. I witnessed it myself. Going from town here out to that old, gray, neglected pile he called his house would take him a good three-quarters of an hour, and he always went on foot, in spite of his advanced age—that is, if he ever came crawling out of that old barn to begin with. Whenever he went hobbling past a cab stand, the carriage men would usually shout rude remarks after him. Yes, you're quite right; he was perfectly solitary. Which is nothing more than he deserved, in my judgment. Whenever I would ride out to see him—and I always went in my handsome new hunting coach with the two chestnut bays, just to annoy him, as it were—whenever I would ride out there, I always had to have my servant pack up food for me; not only that, but if I wanted to drink so much as a cup of tea out there, I had to have everything brought with me—the service, the tea, the sugar, even the ethyl alcohol for the tea urn. One time I didn't take anything. He just went on calmly spooning his evening milk gruel with stale bread in it while I watched. Not once did he ever offer me anything, not even tobacco to fill my pipe with."

"Well, at least it can be said sincerely," I replied with a smile, "that your dealings with the late Mr. Coyle had not the faintest tinge of self-seeking motives. Meanwhile, however—and forgive me, sir, it certainly is nothing to do with me, and yet one could well reach the point of wishing to ask—what could possibly have attracted a gentleman like yourself, so filled with all the joy of living and so markedly bountiful in exactly those material aspects of life, to this old . . . well, this old Harpagon; what I mean is, one could be well-nigh persuaded that you needed Coyle for the simple purpose of having someone to detest, if I may permit myself a little excursion into the field of psychology."

"Perish the thought!" he said very energetically, as his rather large face lengthened even more, making his arched, roof-shaped, and still deep black eyebrows turn into tiny pointed hats, as it were. "Perish the thought!" he cried, "nothing of the kind. At no time did I ever detest Coyle, nor did I hate him, either. What can you be thinking of? Not at all—he was an interesting man at heart, but very much one whom people shunned. In his youth, Coyle traveled the whole world over. I used to enjoy listening to him for hours. Of course you couldn't keep your eyes on him while he was talking; he looked like some huge tuberous root or the bottom of a lopped-off cone walking. And his skin! You've heard of that toad the South American Indians call the pipa; it carries its unborn young in lumpy cells on its back? Well, never mind. God rest his soul, anyway. However—and I want you to listen carefully now, young man, because this is the matter concerning which I really wanted to speak with you—however, in reference to Coyle, I have in fact been feeling hatred, and at its fiercest, also, throughout the course of the past several months; no, it hasn't been toward the deceased or toward any human being at all, for that matter, but

rather toward an inanimate object, or, to state it more precisely, toward a series of inanimate objects. To a certain extent, I've come to you to unburden my heart, or to confess my sins, if that's what you want to call it—odd, an old bloke like me coming to someone young."

"Your trust honors me," I said, because just then I couldn't think of anything better. I was quite knocked down and not at all in the picture. "Just allow me now, however," I continued—perhaps in the hope of gaining time and the composure that comes with it—"just allow me, please, to place a telephone call to that colleague of mine whom you met this morning, before you came here. Perhaps by now he can tell me how matters stand with the will, I mean above all in reference to yourself, Mr. Cropper." With that, I reached for the receiver. The notary told me the following: "Old Cropper isn't mentioned in the last will and testament, not even a single dying word; it's really disgusting, because after all, he's the only one who cared anything about him all that time—well, some people are just like that, tightwads even beyond the grave and ingrates to boot—so that poor daughter will get everything; there's no one about to dispute it—I have a sealed letter here, 'To Be Delivered To Mr. Cropper After My Demise'; is the old boy still there with you? He is? He's probably going to be very disappointed! He isn't? All the better, then. I'll send the letter round with my clerk; half an hour. Mr. Cropper needs to sign a receipt, and that will be that."

In small country towns, where people know one another, and all the more among professional associates, this kind of thing is done without too many formalities. I told my guest what I'd just heard, of course omitting the notary's little side comments. Mr. Cropper displayed limited interest, but when he heard about the letter that was supposed to be brought here in half an hour, he suddenly raised his head, visibly coming out of some brooding state he'd fallen into while I was speaking on the telephone.

"Listen very carefully," he said at once, right away picking up the thread from earlier, "because it will not be such an easy thing for you to favor me with your understanding in this matter, and yet I need more than that—I need nothing less than to be comforted. This old man, so recently deceased, collected all sorts of things during his long lifetime, and, as you can easily imagine in Mr. Coyle's case, they won't exactly have been things to which only the pure devotee of this or that hobby would assign value. One day, then, he took me through the whole house, all the way to a room lying off to one side in the left-hand wing; the rooms we walked through were clearly unoccupied, darkened by closed shutters, and of course unspeakably cold. Coyle confined himself to a single room, you know. When we'd come to the farther end, he struck a light and opened an old wardrobe standing by itself in the completely dust-covered but rather spacious chamber we were in; at first, it didn't appear to contain anything but a few old raincoats and overcoats. However, when Mr. Coyle pushed these aside, I could make out

an iron safe, sturdy and solid, though of ancient design, as I saw at first glance—from donkey's years ago, so to speak.

"It's of course quite clear to me today that everything now taking place was a demonstration of the highest—indeed, of the most utterly extraordinary—trust on the part of Mr. Coyle. And that just makes it all the worse.

"He opened the strongbox—which showed me how primitive the workmanship of the lock was—and let me take a look inside. There prevailed, you might say, exemplary order inside the safe. By the sharp beam of his flashlight, which he was shining into the interior, I saw—on a tier-like arrangement of narrow steps, one above another, all thickly lined with red velvet, like display cases in museums—tiny little brushed-suede leather pouches sitting in three rows. And please take very careful note that I said they were sitting."

"Very well," I answered. "But you could no doubt say they were standing or they were lying."

"No, on no account. You must understand: it was precisely the sitting aspect of those little pouches that was so eminently apparent, not to say blatant, as to make me visualize each of them with tiny legs dangling from the steps," (I was altogether amazed at such childish notions in a man who was quite old, after all), "and that, you see, is what put me into a rage. Yes. That's how it began."

"How do you mean—why did you go into a rage?"

"Because of the sitting, to be precise about it."

"What's that?" I cried, mildly irritated, feeling as I spoke that in some very disagreeable way I'd caught something from him. "Surely there were no such tiny legs present in actual fact?"

"Certainly not. But they wouldn't necessarily be required for sitting. Rather, that sitting was effected—"

"Pardon me," I interrupted. "You mean an impression of sitting was evoked in you."

"All right, suit yourself," he said, a bit impatiently, "the impression was evoked by those little chaps' having the shape of inverted mushrooms, broad-beamed and full-figured, as the expression goes. What I noticed next was that each of them had a large number on the front, on its belly, stamped in some dark color onto the gray suede leather. There were thirty-six of them sitting there altogether; numbers one through twelve on the bottom tier, thirteen through twenty-four on the middle one, and twenty-five through thirty-six on the top, arranged from left to right. Coyle also showed me an inventory list that had been pasted to the door of the safe, on the inside, and that gave the exact contents of each of these little pouches. For example, pouch twenty-three: emeralds, thirty-nine in number—cut, weight, everything noted in detail. A whole fortune had been amassed here. Number thirty-two contained diamonds of utterly indescribable quality; I had never seen any as large or as numerous in the same place. Furthermore,

each stone was kept separate in a little fawn-leather sleeve of its own, designated by a letter of the alphabet, and the inventory enumerating the contents of each pouch also furnished all the particulars about each individual stone. Pouches ten through fourteen held pearls of legendary size. Numbers eighteen through twenty-three contained what are called "nuggets," meaning of course in this case chunks of pure gold, almost all of them larger than hazelnuts; they actually seemed to constitute the least valuable part of this treasury.

"But why all the velvet?" I asked Coyle.

"So that Mammon can have a nice warm place to sit—yes, yes!" he responded jestingly as he rubbed his hands.

"What I want to convey to you further is that I've essentially never taken any interest in things of this kind, and when I would on repeated occasions express to old Coyle my admiration for his hoarded-up wealth, it was in large measure out of courtesy and a desire to make him happy. Speaking in confidence—and I wish to be completely candid with you, sir, since I'm going so far as to make my confession—my circumstances today are such that I could at any time easily purchase all these valuables of Mr. Coyle's, and, truth to tell, without the least strain whatsoever. I would never do it, though; I would rather use my money to provide myself other pleasures.

"What I'm about to tell you now is important: it's the fact that on that very same day—I spent the whole evening with him—Mr. Coyle was seized by one of those serious ailments of his. He must have had a slight stroke; is that what it's called? I'm not sure; I never did understand the first thing about medicine. Apoplexy, perhaps. In short, however, not even that development could frighten me enough to break the spell of certain images lodged in my mind, even though, of course, I was looking after Mr. Coyle all the while and sent my coachman with my carriage to fetch the medical man, although that later proved unnecessary, since Coyle always kept prescribed remedies to hand and the serving woman had instructions from the physician. When Mr. Coyle was feeling rather better, I rode back toward town to seek out someone in the outlying district, out past the river. The name doesn't matter. It was already quite late at night. I went there countless times in the weeks that followed. There I acquired a whole array of skills and abilities previously unfamiliar to me, since I really had never before in my life had a need for anything even resembling them. For example: knowing how to open a shutter and a window from the outside without making too much noise or having to break the glass, which isn't so very hard with those rickety old bolts and locks; or how to turn cleverly to account the noise the wind makes when it's blowing; again, how to unlock any strongbox; finally—most important—how to master the skill of taking wax impressions quick as a flash but yet good enough to be of use to a craftsman later so he can make a key that will work. My course of study lasted a long time, for I'd in fact found my way into a veritable master

class, and I wasn't skimpy with my tuition fees, either, so that my teacher was quite pleased in every regard. Later on, however, as my talents were beginning to grow respectable, I considered it necessary to take a keener interest in precious stones and would spend an hour now and again with Mr. Coyle in his treasure room. When I was finally finished taking the wax impressions, I had all the requisite keys prepared, as well as an additional one able to open the little gate in that wing of the house, which meant that I'd actually attended those lecture-demonstrations on shutters and windows for nothing."

I didn't know what to think. Was it perhaps Mr. Crotter's intention to retain my services in this matter on a professional basis? After all, the activities he had just been describing were at no very far remove from the area of criminal law. While he spoke, his large face would show a strange alternation between genuine, unfeigned worry and totally obvious glee, which couldn't help breaking out over some rascally trick he'd pulled off; the old man's whole state of mind struck me as altogether unpleasant.

"So I'd come that far along," he continued, "and everything was proceeding smoothly; that is, all the keys fit, and I'd even oiled on the sly the door hinges and locks along my route, using a small syringe I carried for that very purpose. It hadn't been terribly difficult to seize opportunities for all these rapid preparations; Mr. Coyle once even left me alone in his treasure room. However, it was precisely on that occasion that my hatred swelled up to measureless proportions."

"Toward your friend Mr. Coyle?"

"Perish the thought," he cried, "not a bit of it! Those little leather pouches, though! Those little gray suede bellies! Those squat little bodies! That sitting all in rows! That soft, warm, red velvet! That thoroughly revolting accumulation of thirty-six evil, envious, old-codger-like beings, all securely—ha! securely?—locked up inside the safe! They needed to be made an example of, put on trial, subjected to the most drastic measures!

"Incidentally, I by no means neglected to make representations to my friend Mr. Coyle concerning his inadequate degree of safeguard over his treasures: too far away from his bedroom; no alarm device of any kind; kept in a totally obsolete safe. Never mind that he slept in the house alone (which I found completely incomprehensible in such an old man anyway). All he did was grumble at me, though, saying that these arrangements had stood as they were for almost forty years, plus the housekeeper never went to that part of the house in any case, because there was nothing there that concerned her, and so she couldn't be snooping. What was he supposed to do, spend a great deal of money to buy a new safe and have it delivered so that everyone in town could find out there were valuables to be purloined from his house? That kind of equipment was what attracted thieves in the first place, he said (and perhaps he wasn't so far wrong, either). So I just dropped the whole subject. A fortnight later was when I set my plan in

motion." He stopped talking and threw his cigar end into the fireplace; as he leaned forward, its fiery glow lent his too-large face, with those little pointed hats that were his eyebrows, a downright eerie appearance.

"The first of my visits to Mr. Coyle—I mean the ones of which he had no inkling—took place at three in the morning. My efforts were quite modest at first. That is, I did nothing more than create trifling disorder by forcing number seventeen on the second tier to change places with number thirty on the third. Then I vanished as I'd come, silently into the night. Not much, but still it meant that that pedantic, fossilized assemblage had been broken in on."

I said nothing.

"It was his habit," Mr. Crotter presently resumed, "to subject his treasures to a meticulous inspection once a week; he'd told me so himself. I called on him after the designated day had passed. And I can tell you quite honestly that I was worried about Mr. Coyle with all my heart. He surely would have had to notice number seventeen, second row, occupying the place of number thirty, third row. As I rode out there, I felt downright sorry for him. My conscience was pricking me quite sharply. What if, heaven forbid, anything should have happened to him, I thought over and over. A stroke! I grew numb with dread in the carriage and came close to weeping. But what will you say when I tell you that the old bloke never let on in the slightest? There was no getting even the tiniest ripple of reaction out of that contemptible Harpagon as to whether he'd noticed anything or how it had affected him. So I turned shamelessly brazen and asked him right out, 'Well now, Mr. Coyle, have you undertaken your usual scrutiny of your treasure room?' And—just think—he answered me, very calmly, 'Of course, yesterday; it's my only pleasure, after all.'

"More drastic measures were going to have to be taken. I allowed ample time to pass. Then I took further steps. I coerced twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and twenty-nine—"

"I beg your pardon," I said, agitated, "what do you mean: you coerced?"

"I mean I forced those little chaps to come down off their velvet, to descend in formation, and straightaway to take their places in the first row, atop two, three, four, and five. I could plainly see their legs dangling. Moreover, they were sitting uncomfortably."

I sighed.

"The next time I rode out there—after a reasonable time, naturally, though I could hardly wait—I had my footman bring along, in addition to my own dinner, a basket of red wine for Mr. Coyle, quite likely from being so terribly conscience-stricken, perhaps from fear for Coyle, and most surely from considering that the poor old man would most likely be in need of some fortifying. But can you guess what wretched sight awaited me? He sat calmly eating his thin milk gruel. There was nothing. Nothing, I say.

Nothing whatever. Was that to be endured? Tell me yourself—was that to be endured?"

"It seems to me that you must have hated Mr. Coyle beyond all measure," I retorted sadly.

"Perish the thought!" he said, and as he placed heavy emphasis on each word, his face now suddenly lengthened to an extreme, somewhat like faces in those distorting mirrors one sees in booths at country fairs. "Perish the thought! Forgive me, but I'm almost beginning to find it a bore how you go on repeating that thought. But to proceed—from that moment I suppressed every feeling of compassion in me. The next time, three, eleven, twenty-nine, eight, seventeen, and ten simply were given no choice but to come forward and take places in a circular formation outside the safe, which I had once again locked with great care. Seventeen sitting at the midpoint of the circle. On the floor of the wardrobe. The next time I rode out to see Coyle I took a basket of champagne. He drank a good bit of it, and plenty of the red wine as well, with great enjoyment, in the best of humors—it's safe to say he was rather knocking it back! You understand, of course, that my situation had grown completely untenable, and it is in that consideration that I allowed myself to be swept away, that I resorted to extremes, that I was no longer prepared to shrink from any brutality. That, you see, is why I'm speaking with you now, although I perhaps might have been better off going to the vicar—"

I took fright. "Mr. Crotter," I said in a very serious tone, "please tell me something without any further ado." I sat upright. "Did you—harm Mr. Coyle in any way?"

"Perish the thought!" he cried, and for a moment it appeared to me as if his face, from his hair to the tip of his chin, measured a full yard. "It's truly frightful how little imagination you young people have! Ah, this generation that's come along after the war! You're always look for the most banal possible explanation of everything. You'll forgive me, of course, but considering the age difference between us—"

I made a movement with my upper body that could have been thought of as a slight bow.

"Nonsense, all nonsense!" cried Mr. Crotter. "To go on—there followed a sharp increase in the number of my nocturnal visits, which means that the intervals between them grew ever shorter. Six, nine, eleven, nineteen, sixteen, as well as fifteen, eighteen, twenty-three, twenty-eight, in addition to thirty-five and thirty-six from the top tier—first and foremost, however, seventeen—were forced to march in single file, moving from the safe to the door. Seventeen in the lead. The time after that I ordered a zigzag advance, called for the same formation yet once more (always with seventeen in the lead!), and then—after having tried double files, among other configurations—hit upon the most dashing way of executing these maneuvers like seasoned horse troops. Number two, hop! with a leap up

onto three, four onto five, six onto seven, and so on, with seventeen in the lead, quite naturally—" (I wanted to interject with a question, since the "quite naturally" wasn't making very clear sense to me, but Mr. Crotter had so warmed up to his story that my attempt was unavailing). "Somewhere during this time it was borne in on me," he continued, "that all this fuss was basically about nothing more than my having it in for seventeen (second row); this creature had become the focus of immeasurable hatred on my part. Why, I don't know, nor did I ever even investigate what that graybelly in fact contained; it makes no difference, after all.

"Then I resorted forthwith to the particular extreme that is weighing so heavily on my conscience today, good sir. I chose a hideously cold winter night. I opened both window casements wide, made seventeen go outside alone, wound around his neck a cord I'd brought with me, and, in that extreme cold, hauled him up by the window frame, so that he swung free about a yard below it. The safe was of course locked back up again, all according to good order."

He kept silent, as did I, saying nothing but staring into the fire, whose peaceful embers, now that there were no flames flickering, were glowing deep and even, like red velvet.

"Mr. Coyle died on the following evening, the result of a heart attack, as you know."

"Perhaps you might have been better going to the vicar after all, Mr. Crotter," I said.

"Do you really think one could make a story like mine understandable to that reverend gentleman? I am certainly not of that view."

"Nor am I, Mr. Crotter. A story like yours could scarcely be made understandable—I'm sure you'll excuse me—to any reasonable person; for all that, however, the vicar might have been able to talk to you, I mean talk to you in matters of conscience."

"Now we're where we're supposed to be!" he cried in a voice grown suddenly very lively, not to say impassioned, which in turn disconcerted me even more. "Conscience! That's exactly it! You can hardly imagine what I've been suffering since the old man died. My days pass by under a weight of oppression. I don't wish to use a terrible word for what it is I have possibly done, but that word is standing vigilant inside me all the time, trying to venture forth, desiring to be spoken out loud. That's why it's you whom I've come to, you see; you're young, a man of the world, with insight—what good would our old vicar do me?" He was talking himself into state of growing excitement, so that I couldn't help entertaining the grotesque impression that those fearful pangs of conscience of his were a downright pleasure to him, were even bringing him a kind of childish happiness.

"I do not wish to repeat yet again what was so vexing to you earlier, Mr. Crotter," I said, "but you are well aware of what I consider the actual root

cause underlying your treatment of Mr. Coyle. And it is on exactly that account that I believe your guilt feelings exist, feelings that would leave a residue even if we could assume, for example, that Mr. Coyle saw through all your tomfoolery from the very first, correctly surmising you, Mr. Crotter, to be the perpetrator, and therefore not one whit anxious or afraid. That would mean that he was to some extent just letting you do what you liked while viewing the whole affair as a harmless, childish prank. There are several indications to support the point, after all. You were left undisturbed for a remarkably long time. Never did he direct so much as a single word to you on the subject—"

"But he ended up being struck down, didn't he!" Crotter interrupted, utterly triumphant, as incredible as it might seem; but a second later his tone modulated to totally heart-rending. "Oh, if only I could take genuine comfort in what you've just said, sir, how gladly I would do so! How would it ever be possible to arrive at certainty, though? And nothing less than certainty would be the true comfort here; nothing less than it would be able to release me from the torments of my conscience! Do you really mean, though, that it might be at all possible to look upon that—that last attack merely as a development that more or less occurred by sheer coincidence on the very same day? Not as a result of his discovering the frightful circumstances under which I compelled seventeen to pass the night? What if he didn't even undertake his usual round of inspection on the following day? Still, wouldn't it be possible that even if he knew all about it from the beginning—which I don't believe, which I daren't believe, because it would mean I'm letting myself off much too easy!—but wouldn't it be possible that this final discovery broke him, shattered him nevertheless, and for the very simple reason that—to put it briefly—what he was forced to witness and to go through there at the end was too wicked for him to bear? Is that it? Oh, my poor, dear friend! But what do you mean by talking about my 'treatment of Mr. Coyle'? How could you so misunderstand? In all I've told you, did I subject him to any 'treatment'? Perish the thought! Perish the thought! Why, I granted those contemptible little graybellies an independent existence of their own, as it were; to a certain extent, I breathed into those wretched little beings the very breath of life. Yes, that's what I did. They were mere goods and chattel, and rather mean ones at that, as far as I'm concerned. I confused the concepts of subject and object. I'm actually an innocent man. And yet that gives me no reassurance. I—and my poor friend as well!—we became in a certain sense victims of a philosophical error on my part. Ah, but this realization also brings me little comfort—"

There came a knock at the door, and my serving man admitted the notary's clerk, who forthwith presented Mr. Crotter with a sealed envelope of medium size. After he had given his signature and we were alone again, my guest tore the envelope open.

One can well imagine that I was observing him with the keenest suspense. What happened next, however, was altogether unforeseeable, and it smashed to atoms, as it were, anything I might have been anticipating or conjecturing.

With a violent motion, Mr. Crotter yanked some object out of the envelope into the daylight; I made out that it was a limp, empty gray leather pouch, out of the mouth of which was protruding a longish strip of paper. Crotter stared at the strip of paper for a full minute, leapt up, flung both it and the pouch at me, and, his face dark red with fury, took a few paces and stopped behind me, in the center of the room, where he stood struggling for breath.

I looked down at what was on my lap. The empty suede pouch bore the number "17" stamped into it. On the slip of paper were written only a few words, but they shook me rather badly, producing in me what I might even call a gentle terror:

"I am cold. I am getting very cold—" Here the writing broke off.

"Mr. Crotter," I said softly, "Coyle obviously was trying to write to you in his last moments, as the chill of death was creeping over him—"

But now an indescribable ranting burst out behind me:

"What? How's that? Chill of death, indeed! Nonsense, all nonsense! You think you understand, do you? That pouch, that little pouch, that rotten little graybelly, that disgusting little gray swine, that creature despicable beyond all others—that's what spoke those words! Oh, you're cold, are you? Ha! Let me just help you now! Wait! There!—"

He leapt over to me, grabbed the pouch, hurled it into the glowing fireplace and shouted:

"There! Warm yourself in that red velvet, you revolting thing, you creepy little monster, you loathsome graybelly! Just let your little mushroom legs burn up!—"

The leather twisted in the glow as flame spread from the glimmering edge to the middle. Now the pouch puffed out somewhat and looked ready to burst; it writhed and turned while Crotter went on raving:

"Coyle knew! He wanted to get a rise out of me! That swine! I hope he's roasting in the very depths of hell, where all stingy old tightwads belong! You lousy bastard! You made me go sneaking in and out there! Just wait—"

Crotter kicked the flaring embers with his boot, burying the remaining white ashes of the leather. "He knew all along, that bastard!" he moaned once more as he collapsed into the armchair, worn out at last.

For quite a good while it was perfectly still. Then Mr. Crotter resumed, in a low, dry voice:

"And what do you have to say about all this, sir?"

To make it brief at the end, I'll just leave it at saying that by the time we'd reached this point the whole story had grown too absurd for me, so I replied in a rather icy tone:

"Nothing, Mr. Crotter. This matter appears to me, in every respect, to lie outside the sphere of my responsibilities as your attorney as well as outside any authority I might have in this regard."

So then he departed, highly annoyed, as it seemed to me. Four weeks later he removed his name from my list of clients and revoked my power of attorney. Apparently I had gone too far in my disapproval of his private life. The loss of Mr. Crotter as a client at that time sent shock waves through my working budget that were severe enough to make me keep in memory to this very day—if only for that reason alone—the story of the torment of the little leather pouches.

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